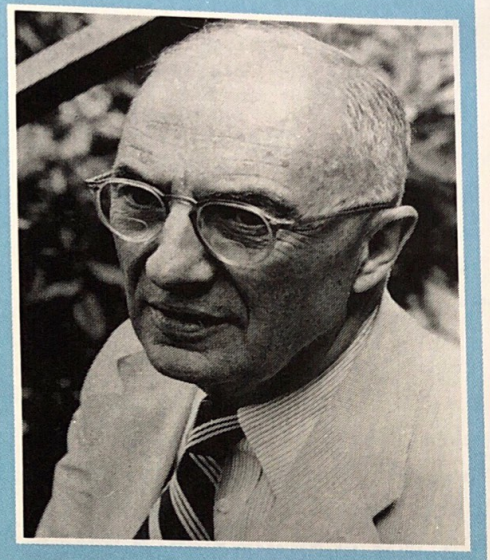
William Carlos Williams



1883–1963

A close friend of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams was an important member of the Imagist movement. Opposing Pound's belief in using allusions to maintain a link to the past, Williams focused on capturing the common, everyday images of his time in an effort to create poetry with relevance to the lives of ordinary people.

Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, where he spent most of his life. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, he became a pediatrician. In 1909 he published his first volume of poetry and began pursuing a double career as a poet and a doctor. Williams felt that his experiences as a doctor helped provide him with inspiration as a poet, crediting medicine for his ability to "gain entrance to . . . the secret gardens of the self."

While Williams's first book was modeled after the work of English Romantic poets, he soon developed his own distinctive voice. This voice emerged with the publication of *Spring and All* (1913), a book of mixed prose and poetry. In this book and in *In the American Grain* (1925), Williams made it clear that his aim was to capture the essence of modern American life by depicting a variety of ordinary people, objects, and experiences using up-to-date, everyday language. He avoided presenting explanations or making generalizations, commenting that a poet should deal in "No ideas but in things." By this he meant that a poet should present concrete images that speak for themselves, evoking emotions and stimulating thoughts and ideas.

In 1948 Williams suffered a heart attack, and three years later he had the first of a series of strokes. He was forced to abandon his medical practice, and writing became increasingly difficult. However, he still managed to produce *Paterson* (1946–1958), a five-part epic poem filled with observations about life in the city of Paterson, New Jersey, and two additional collections of poetry, *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (1962). In 1963 he received the Pulitzer Prize for *Pictures of Breughel.*

Despite his fame and popularity and the prestigious awards he won, Williams always encouraged the young poets who wrote him letters or arrived at his home. He seemed never to forget the loneliness and isolation he himself had felt as a young and struggling poet. "I think the artist, generally speaking, feels lonely," he remarked in 1950. "Perhaps his recourse to art, in any form, comes from his essential loneliness. He is usually in rebellion against the world."

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

The Locust Tree in Flower; The Red Wheelbarrow; This Is Just to Say

Writers' Techniques

Rhythm. William Carlos Williams believed that rhythm—the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem—is the essence of poetry. In writing his poems, he attempted to shape the language of everyday speech into rhythmic units—lines and stanzas—that reflect and reinforce the meaning of the poems. Because each line serves as a separate rhythmic unit, you should read his poetry line by line, pausing briefly at the end of each line and pausing a bit longer at the end of each stanza. These pauses reinforce meaning by adding emphasis to important words, ideas, and images.

Focus

William Carlos Williams's poems focus on ordinary people, objects, and experiences. For example, in this group of poems, he writes about a locust tree, a red wheelbarrow, and the experience of eating plums from the icebox. Prepare a list of other ordinary experiences about which he might have written.

Primary Source

Modernist poets often took modern, industrial America as their subject. Claiming an equal status with English poetry, they asserted that common American subjects and common American language were as appropriate to poetry as the elevated subjects and diction of traditional poetry. In so doing they also invented a new critical language. Calling a poem a "machine made of words," Williams used a modern, industrial image to refashion conventional ideas about poetry. He wrote in 1944:

> A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant.
>
> Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is the machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy. As in all machines its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character. In a poem this movement is distinguished in each case by the character of the speech from which it arrives. . . .
>
> There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which they most resemble the machine, to give language its highest dignity, its illumination in the environment to which it is native.

PINK LOCUSTS AND WINDY MOON, 1959
Charles Burchfield
Collection of the Chase Manhattan Bank

The Locust Tree in Flower

William Carlos Williams

Among
of
green

stiff
old
bright

broken
branch
come

white
sweet
May

again

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What do you associate with the month of May?
2. What "thing" captures the essence of spring for you?

Interpreting

3. How does the title help you to understand the poem?
4. (a) Which lines describe the locust tree before it blossoms? (b) Which lines describe the tree after it blossoms?
5. (a) What does this poem reveal about a locust tree's appearance? (b) How does the line arrangement add emphasis to the tree's important characteristics?
6. What is the significance of the final line?

Applying

7. How well does this poem support Williams's claim that poets should deal in "No ideas but in things"?

Learning Options

1. **Cross-curricular Connection.** Is the image Williams presents of the locust tree accurate? Use an encyclopedia or a book about horticulture to learn more about the flowering tree. Share your findings with classmates.
2. **Art.** Create your own image of spring. You might draw a picture, take a photograph, make a sculpture, write a poem, or simply bring to class an object symbolizing spring. Share your image with classmates. Does it speak for itself?

The Red Wheelbarrow

William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. How is this poem like a painting of a still life?
2. If you were to use words to paint a still life, what objects would you mention?

Interpreting

3. What do you think depends on the red wheelbarrow?
4. To what sense do the images in the poem appeal?

Applying

5. (a) What types of associations do you have with the images in the poem? (b) What types of feelings do the images evoke?

Analyzing Literature

Understanding Rhythm

In writing his poems, William Carlos Williams attempted to shape the language of everyday speech into rhythmic units—lines and stanzas—that reflect and reinforce the meaning of the poems. For example, in "The Red Wheelbarrow," Williams calls our attention to the image of the wheelbarrow by breaking up the word and presenting it on two separate lines. His presentation of the word also reflects its meaning, since a wheelbarrow is composed of two separate parts.

1. What rhythmic and visual pattern does Williams establish in "The Red Wheelbarrow"?
2. How does the pattern help to emphasize each separate image?

Learning Option

Speaking and Listening. Discussing "The Red Wheelbarrow," critic Roy Harvey Pearce comments: "At its worst this is togetherness in a chickenyard. At its best it is an exercise in the creation of the poetic out of the anti-poetic." How do you see it? Be prepared to defend your view in a class discussion.

This Is Just to Say

William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What is your reaction to this poem?
2. What philosophy of life do you think this poem expresses? Explain.

Interpreting

3. How does the title relate to the poem?
4. To what senses do the images in the poem appeal?
5. (a) Why is the incident described in the poem important to the speaker? (b) How do the last three lines help to reveal the incident's importance?

Applying

6. Why do you think Williams might have chosen to write a poem about such a seemingly insignificant incident?

Thinking and Writing

Writing an Apology

"This Is Just to Say" is, after all, a note of apology. However, the speaker doesn't seem to be at all sorry for what he did. Create a similar situation: A character does something he or she knows is incorrect but is actually glad to have done. For example, you might write about a sister borrowing a sweater without asking or a child giving into temptation and sneaking a piece of just-baked pie. Using Williams's poem as a model, write a note of apology. When you revise, make sure you have included details that appeal to the senses.

Learning Option

Writing. Make Williams's poem into your own. Choose another food to take the place of "the plums" (line 2) and revise the poem accordingly. Share your version with classmates. Is it as effective as the original? Why or why not?